

Christian Worshiping and Psychoanalysis in Spiritual Truth

Ana-Marie Rizzuto

Both Christian faith and psychotherapy aim at a profound understanding of the inner person and require attentive exploration of oneself. Psychotherapy aims at helping us assume responsibility for private psychic acts that add suffering to the pain and limitations of our lives. The Christian faith aims at guiding us to assume responsibility for the dark side of our nature in order to facilitate our worshiping "in spirit and truth."

To carry out its task, psychotherapy requires complete freedom of thought to explore any issue, including the personal manner of representing God in the privacy of our experience. In this respect, faith in God's help may sustain a person in this most difficult task of self-discovery.

For the purpose of this presentation I describe worship as the deepest human act aimed at encountering God in His wish to reveal Himself to human beings. To begin, I suggest we look at a Gospel passage, a conversation between Jesus and a Samaritan woman. John 4:6-27 describes a conversation between Jesus and the Samaritan woman after he asked her for a drink. The woman challenges Jesus to give her the water that satiates all thirst. Jesus, in a remarkable nonsequitur, asks her to call her husband. She lies, saying she has none. Jesus agrees, and discloses to her that He knows she has had five husbands and that her present companion is not her husband. The woman pays little attention to her being caught in a lie and, assuming He is a prophet, asks Him about "the place where men ought to worship." This time, Jesus gives her a profound answer: "the hour is coming . . . when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for such the Father seeks to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth."

This remarkable conversation presents a Samaritan woman who is capable of lying about her husband while she pursues, undeterred, the larger question of worshipping. Jesus makes it very clear that worship is not a matter of place but an

attitude of the spirit, worshiping in truth. What could it mean to worship "in spirit and truth"? What are the conditions, spiritual and psychical, that make possible such an attitude? At this point all we know is that, for the believer, the Christian God has revealed that He wants to be worshiped in "spirit and truth."

Freud, in his search for the psychic truth of the human mind, made discoveries capable of shaking the foundations of our deeply settled belief that we are in full possession of our psychic house. The evidence for unconscious thoughts, wishes, and intentions accumulated in the progressive course of Freud's discoveries until it became the foundation of psychoanalytic theory and therapeutic technique.

An unconscious psychical act, in Freud's discoveries, can be "a thought, a wish or an intention" that escapes our conscious awareness because we are not willing to acknowledge it as our thought, wish, or intention. Freud's most profound discovery is the unavoidable duplicity of our conscious self-perception and our persistence in self-deception. For those who wish a more truthful self-knowledge, Freud (1940) proposes the laborious task of "translating unconscious processes into conscious ones" because, in spite of its capacity to deceive us, conscious awareness "remains the one light which illuminates our path and leads us through the darkness of mental life" (p. 286). Freud repeatedly pointed out how hard it is to come to grips with our hidden motives and how we need another person to help us find the truth about ourselves.

Now I would like to quote a passage in Mark, the confrontation between Jesus and the Pharisees: "And he said to them, 'Well did Isaiah prophesy of you hypocrites, as it is written, "This people honors me with their lips, but their heart is far from me; in vain do they worship me, teaching as doctrine the precepts of men." You leave the commandment of God, and hold fast the tradition of men.' Then Jesus concludes: Hear me, all of you, and understand: There is nothing outside a man which by going into him can defile him" . . . (Mark 7:14-15) "What comes out of a man is what defiles a man. For from within, out of the heart of man, come evil thoughts, fornication, theft, murder, adultery, coveting, wickedness, deceit, licentiousness, envy, slander, pride, foolishness. All these evil things come from within, and they defile a man" (Mark 7:20-23).

Jesus and Freud have described, each from his own point of view, the obscure motives of the human heart and the persistent darkness of our mental life. Jesus insists on the need to search for His saving light to find our God. Freud insists on the use of the searching light of conscious awareness to illuminate the dark recesses of our unconscious motives to find ourselves as we are rather than as we want to believe we are. It is easy to see that for both Jesus and Freud, the human being is in need of help, help understood in its most essential and existential meaning. We need help to acknowledge our own motives, to accept our rejected thoughts and wishes, to know who we are, to be able to discern human consideration from divine commandment. To say it simply, it is not without effort, without self-searching that we can be who we are. We all are, in biblical terms, broken by the weight of sin and, in Freudian terms, split by the forces of conflictual and contradictory wishes. We all need therapy. Therapy is the wish to acknowledge our condition, the darkness of heart and mind, and humbly to search for those who can help us have the courage

to see our murky motives and to assume responsibility for them. Then we will be able to find the delicious taste of the living waters of salvation to worship the Father in spirit and truth.

Such is the human condition. We cannot live in "spirit and truth" without help, both human and divine. What is, then, the function of psychoanalysis in matters of life and faith? Can psychotherapy contribute to the internal illumination sought by the believer? Can the internal illumination of faith contribute to psychic healing? And if so, in what way, to what measure? These are complex and difficult questions to answer.

I have opted to answer them by looking into the component of responsibility required in both psychotherapy and religious faith. The word "responsibility" comes from the Latin *respondere*, to give an answer to someone whose words or presence interrogates us. The word extends its meaning to imply being morally accountable in the presence of another for one's acts and being. In this sense the term is close in meaning to the word "religion," in its Latin implication of linking a person to a divine being by responding to the call of a god.

The word "responsibility" appears on the surface to contradict the basic analytic concept of a psychic life founded on myriad unconscious processes accumulated since the days in which our tender age made it impossible for us to be in charge of events that mark us for the rest of our days. How can we be held accountable for what we are, when we did not ask to be born (God's and our parents' responsibility), nor did we select the place and circumstances of our existence? It is a well-documented psychological fact (recognized by all religions) that when we reach the level of psychic maturity to assume responsibility, we are already marked with the basic character traits that color our personalities for the rest of our lives. It seems to follow that we are the victims of circumstances: our parents' faulty love, the injuries and the neglect inflicted by others, the tragedies of life now made into the fabric of our being. Such reasoning did not have to wait for Freud's theory of unconscious motivation to prompt human beings to free themselves from responsibility. The history of religions witnesses how well disposed human beings have always been to place the responsibility for their ills on the shoulders of gods and demons. The history of the devil is the history of the human willingness to disown responsibility, as is illustrated by the story of Adam and Eve, each saying that another was responsible for the eating of the apple. It is possible to conclude that the key issue in psychopathology and the formation of the unconscious is the unavoidable human tendency to reject as belonging to oneself anything that is considered "bad" or "unacceptable," as the Samaritan did when she lied, saying she had no husband. Today's psychoanalytic theories of formation of the self, from Klein to Kernberg and Kohut, are based on such primary divisions between "good" and "bad." The "bad" goes to someone else. It is true that the process of psychic growth requires the integration of the "bad" with the "good," but the tendency to reject as ours what we disapprove of persists throughout life.

Early in his work, Freud (1893–1895), talking about the generation of hysteria, concluded that a greater amount of moral courage would have been of advantage to the person concerned (p. 123). He knew that the motive of all defenses is the painful

affect connected to unacceptable thoughts and wishes. Nonetheless, clinical experience forced his final conclusion, that the patient has "to overcome the distressing affect aroused by having been able to entertain such a wish even for a moment" (p. 304). The words "painful affect" introduce a key element, that of human suffering and pain. Freud's therapy is in its very essence a method to help people tolerate the pain caused by their own thoughts, wishes, intentions, fantasies—in short, the pain caused by psychical acts. The capacity to stand the pain allows for the acceptance into conscious awareness of the repudiated psychical acts and with it the alleviation of the suffering.

This assertion requires some reflection. There should be no doubt that everyday life brings unsolicited real pain and harm, both physical and psychical. The untimely loss of a beloved and needed person, maiming of the body, illness, humiliation or rejection by others, loss of home and country are unquestionable causes of intense psychic suffering. Pain, however, is never in itself the cause of psychopathology. The full acceptance of pain allows for actual suffering and requires time for psychic elaboration. This suffering is unavoidable and a normal part of psychic life. However, we find it difficult to understand why we have to suffer. It is almost impossible for us to tolerate the injuries of life without complex interpretations about the nature and causes of the events. We build around them wishes, resentments, revenges, fantasies, hopes, heroic or pathetic myths about ourselves, that may add neurotic suffering to real suffering. I believe it is possible to say that a good portion of our suffering and difficulties result from the inability to acknowledge our psychic participation in the creation of these painful interpretations and psychical acts, unconscious or conscious. Many of them are long-forgotten thoughts, wishes, and feelings that still exert their influence on our manner of perceiving ourselves and others.

Some examples may clarify this point. Goldberg (1991) presents the case of a thirty-seven-year-old single woman who had difficulties in her relationships with men. She felt unworthy of the respectful man of quality she wanted to have. She believed the cause of her difficulties to be

that she had been regarded as unworthy by her parents, especially her father. . . . She seemed to believe that her present difficulties could be completely explained by what she recalled of her past mistreatment. . . . She saw herself as an innocent victim whose potential had been undermined by an abusive father and a victimized mother. They had treated her as though she had no inner life, and she believed this to be the case about herself. (p. 260)

In the course of the treatment she came to see that in her expectations of her father, "perhaps she had rejected what he could give, wanting only what he could not give. She noted similar trends in her relationship with her mother" (p. 262). Later in the treatment she realized "that her projections and distortions had clouded her views of many of the important people in her life. . . . She had only recently begun to allow herself to remember some of the positive interactions with her father. She was also becoming aware of the pain that accompanies these shifts in perspective." She concluded, "That opens up wounds—feelings I spared myself from always being angry at him." In this case the patient found a more truthful manner of looking

at her life beyond the victim's stance. The analytic treatment helped the patient assume responsibility for her own role in transforming the actual suffering of the child she had been into a persistent pathology related to "her inner world of wishful and defensive motives" (p. 264). It also gave her the possibility to relate to her father.

Another example is that of a woman who had hoped that her therapist's actions and interpretations would take care of her pain and "cure" her. Finally, she came to realize that it was not possible to fulfill such a wish. She concluded sadly, "I am all alone. I had the wish that you would cure all that is broken and beyond repair in me. I have to give that wish up. Give up the little girl. Take responsibility for myself. I wanted you to take care of me. I imagined you could do it. If I am to come out of this, I have to take responsibility for myself." For her, responsibility meant accepting for the first time that even when she was not responsible for the suffering she had undergone as a child, she was responsible for her insistence that she had to be "fixed" by someone while she refused to do anything herself. She was responsible for her wish that somebody compensate her for her past grief. In this manner she had closed the door to any "truthful" encounter with those who wanted to help her.

Another patient, a professional woman, said it more drastically: "I have never wanted to own myself. I have never thought I should take charge of my life." She expected to remain an emotional child in a limbo of disappointed fatherly love. These three persons had, paradoxically, something in common with the Pharisees. They were so preoccupied with what was to set them right that they did not have psychic time to attend to what was there in their own hearts.

The psychic and religious responsibility of responding in spirit and truth that I am talking about goes far beyond the common meaning of the term. It refers to the quintessential act of being human—there, in the core of our psychic life where the essential acts of life take place: love, hate, belief, hope, and despair. It refers to the only sphere where religious life takes place, in the secret chambers of our private acts of worship, reverence, and respect for the Divine Being, our neighbor, and ourselves. It means to assume responsibility for the thoughts and feelings we do have about, God, the neighbor, ourselves, even if we try to make believe we do not. This description of responsibility is too simple a manner of talking because we all know what solid defenses our mind has erected to protect us from the pain of self-knowledge, and how automatically the defenses come to exert their necessary censorship. Like the body, the mind reacts with an instant withdrawal from the experience of pain. It takes great psychic and moral courage not to uncensor our wishes, thoughts, and fantasies in order to know the recesses of our own being. It requires the most courageous act of freedom we can possibly imagine: the freedom to think anything we do think, and then the freedom to own it.

It is here, in the realm of enabling a person to acquire freedom of thought, that Freud (1933) saw the enmity between religion and psychoanalytic therapy: "Whatever may be the value and importance of religion, it has no right in any way to restrict thought. . . . The prohibitions against thought issued by religion—become the cause of severe inhibitions in the subject's conduct of life (pp.170–171).

Is there not a similarity of reasoning between Freud, the twentieth-century scientist asking for new freedom of private thought, and Jesus, confronting the officialism of the Pharisees in their inability to tolerate the fact that the disciples of Jesus ate without following traditional rules of washing? The Pharisees could not think that there were ways of doing things other than those approved by their traditions. In this way, representing official religion, they behaved like a strict superego that cannot tolerate anything that contradicts its established rules. Neither the Pharisees nor the superego can take the time off to explore the value of that which is unusual. They condemn blindly. They prohibit the freedom to explore the pathways of actions and new ideas. Such prohibitions are the very antithesis of the freedom exercised by Jesus and the Samaritan woman in their surprising exploration of her lies as well as her wish to know the right way to worship. They broke all the rules of tradition: a Jew asking for water from a Samaritan; a man talking with an unknown foreign woman; such a man getting into the private business of her married life; her lying without much concern; her asking questions about the Jews' worship. And it was there, in that unabashed conversation, that the essential religious question of all times was asked and answered: the Father wants those who worship in spirit and truth. I believe Freud is right when he demands absolute freedom of private thought and condemns any religion that restricts it. It is impossible for a human being to worship in spirit and truth if he or she does not have the psychic freedom to explore all thoughts, including the forbidden and untraditional ones. A religion that cannot afford such freedom cannot expect to have worshipers "in spirit and truth."

Freud (1927) also complained that the believers put their naive trust in a bland God who "orders everything for the best—that is, to make it enjoyable for us. Over each one of us there watches a benevolent Providence which is only seemingly stern and which will not suffer us to become a plaything of the overmighty and pitiless forces of nature" (p. 19).

This description, even when it does not do justice to mature believers, does correctly portray, a large number of believers who use religion and God in the way that the patients described above used their treatment, that is, placing the responsibility for dealing with the complexities of their minds and lives in the hands of other people or their therapists. A religion so soft and free of conflict reveals its owners' avoidance of internal contradiction and strife, and its denial of life's actual tragedies, and of the existence of evil intentions in human beings.

What, then, is the function of psychotherapy in matters of life and faith? Can psychotherapy contribute to the internal illumination sought for by the believer? The answer to both questions is a positive one. In what it refers to the believer, a psychotherapy based on the Freudian premises of unrestrictedly exploring the private world of wishes and intentions, and assuming responsibility for one's thoughts and psychical acts, does provide the opportunity to explore and clarify the motives of actions and wishes, and therefore to purify our worshipping. To say it in the words of Jesus, psychotherapy offers the opportunity to recognize honestly that which comes "from within, out of the heart of man . . . evil thoughts. The condition for this exploration is suggested by the analytic method: that nothing be left

unexplored, nothing considered unthinkable, because what is sought is to achieve an honest knowledge of oneself. Such an approach stops at nothing. Religious beliefs and attitudes, the bargains we strike with God in our unavoidable ambivalence toward Him, the ways we cheat as believers, the lies we tell ourselves so as not to confront our unbelief—all can and should be subjects of our exploration. A person who truly means to worship "in spirit and truth" can only deepen his or her religious experience, perhaps not without suffering, by exploring the inner sources of religious convictions, behaviors, hopes, and fears. A psychotherapy carried out with such a freedom of spirit contributes to a religion that can be truly honest to God, to a religion that can afford to believe that God does not need our lies, our pharisaical performance of rituals without the recognition of our motives. I am talking here about assuming full responsibility for our belief and religious practices by bringing to light the private, hidden motives in our personal religion. The surfacing of hitherto unknown intentions and wishes may bring about an internal illumination, a clarity of self-perception, that adds richness and a deeper texture to our belief.

There is still the question of suffering in ordinary life and of having to tolerate what we do not like about ourselves. Suffering moves us to try to understand. However, no self-understanding can be arrived at without certain suffering. It is here that the person of the therapist and belief in a redeemer make their major contribution. We cannot handle ourselves alone. The pain of self-disclosure can be tolerated with the helping presence of the therapist. It is here that belief and psychotherapy may become interactive. Psychotherapy may help to bear the pain and sustaining beliefs can provide motivation to continue a process that brings about suffering. I would find it suspicious if a person who is religious segregates psychotherapy from prayer and from religious understanding of his or her personal life. Such disjunction has only one name: defense. In this respect, any therapist's avoidance of exploring the religious world of the patient creates the opportunity for the use of religion as one of the most intractable resistances. Processes that should be interactive become isolated from each other. These reflections should alert all therapists to attend to the religious experiences of their patients as much as they attend to other aspects of their lives. Otherwise, we prove Hans Kung right in his saying that religion is the last taboo.

PSYCHOTHERAPY AND THE REPRESENTATION OF GOD

In my book *The Birth of the Living God* (1979) I have provided empirical evidence to demonstrate that the manner in which we conceive of God and represent Him in our minds is exquisitely particular for each individual. The sources of the representations are the multitude of affective exchanges between parental and early childhood figures, including all sensory, preverbal, and verbal communications. God is a being that cannot be perceived by the senses. When the child arrives at the moment in which he or she has to form a conception of God, the child must flesh out such being with the experiences at hand. In this sense, like the mother in Winnicott's manner of speaking, God is created at the moment He is found. God is found in the culture's reference to a divine, invisible being, and is created out of preexistent interpersonal experiences, by each individual child, who gives to God

a concrete, particular shape. This God representation acquires its well-defined shape long before official religion can present a theologically conceived God. All human beings (of the Western tradition, at least) confront this dilemma of encountering a God whose representational sources come from two very different levels of experience at two different moments of development. The God of theology has to wait until full psychic maturity (a rare achievement) for a person to be ready to grasp the awesome depth of God's existence. Before this moment, the God representation has suffered the ordinary vicissitudes of the representation of the parents and all those close to the growing child. The God of a person at age twenty or thirty may still carry the undisguised imprint of a material childhood trait: "What I do not like about God is that He is not there when I need Him." Other God representations may be as concrete at age sixty as the child's attachment to a feature of the paternal face: "I didn't even put whiskers on Him," commented Fiorella Domenico after she had finished drawing her picture of God.

The mystics of all traditions have always insisted, joining God's persistent injunctions to the people of Israel, that we must not confuse our ways of understanding God with God Himself. Our ways of understanding God are embedded in our personal histories, in the joys and miseries of the way in which we grew up, including our fantasies, myths, and ways in which we have embroidered our personal story. Some can say, like one of my patients, "I did not have a chance; God cursed me from the beginning," whereas others may protest that they have given up any commerce with God because He has not delivered that to which they believe themselves entitled. Therefore, a person who sincerely wants to worship a transcendent God must take the task very seriously. I would like to quote a paragraph from my book that refers to this point:

Integration of the conceptual [theological] component of the God representation and some of the images that contribute to it requires a persistent psychic work of soul searching, self-scrutiny, and internal reelaboration of the representation. This is analogous to what happens in the analytic process, where many of the sources that have provided elements for the formation of a particular representation or experience are reconsidered and divested of some of their real and imaginary danger or appeal. These considerations explain how many analyses that have not dealt with religious issues have, however, modified the God representation and religious beliefs. (pp. 48-49)

The constant psychic changes brought about by the life cycle require that we update our God representation in an *aggiornamento* of psychic experience that permits it to keep pace with our personal changes. This updated God can be worshiped in spirit and truth, at least our best truth for the day. Many religious crises are due to a lack of synchrony between an infantile representation of God and the life situation of the person. Two excellent examples are those of the high school student who brings with her a childish anthropomorphic God representation incapable of surviving the intense moral and intellectual demands of college life and those who have kept a naive belief in a good God whom they expect will protect them from all injuries of life. Such people lose their belief, or fall into profound crisis, when confronted with unexpected tragedy or unpredicted disappointment.

The majority of the people who have left behind their childhood beliefs belong to these two categories. The God representation, to be believable in true psychological depth, must have been transformed together with the changes the individual has undergone. I am not talking about psychologizing God, the transcendent God. I am talking about a normal process of transformation that colors all human relations. There is both a type and a mode of relating for each psychological age, and God is not an exception to the rule. In fact, all I am doing is echoing Freud, who complained about the infantile believers, adults in other aspects of their lives but relating to God as helpless children.

These considerations once more bring to focus the issue of responsibility. We are not responsible for the God representation we have unconsciously formed in the course of development. We are, however, responsible for the continuous examination of the way we conceive of the transcendent God, to whom we intend to relate, to make sure that we project as little onto Him as possible. This is a key issue for those who take their belief seriously. In the same way that therapy helps a person revise the conception of a parent, as illustrated in the case presented by Goldberg, it can help a person explore his or her way of conceiving God. After all, there is no reason for us to be less neurotic with God than we are with our parents, spouses, and children. Psychotherapy, here, is at the service of the religious efforts of the person who seeks to purify the vision of God and the relationship with Him.

The religious desire to grow and remain in a meaningful relationship with an actual God may provide strong motivation to explore and change in spite of the suffering that the process may require. No one that I know of has yet studied whether prayer and the spiritual disposition to be open to a transcendent God facilitate the process of modifying defenses and opening up psychic territories that have remained closed for years.

CONCLUSION

A psychotherapy that requires the patient to assume responsibility for self-discovery and change coincides in its aims with the essential Christian description of needing to know the inner motives of a human being as the source of all impurity of heart. Psychoanalysis and the Gospel agree that what really counts in life are the most private wishes, actions, and intentions. Our external actions do not reveal the essence of a person. True human life occurs where we are most secretive with ourselves, most capable of self-deception. The deep search for our hidden motives and the clearing of our conscious intentions by the exposure of our unconscious reasons is the psychological way to honesty. Speaking from the religious point of view, the search for the exposure of all motives is, in my opinion, the psychological prerequisite for worshiping in "spirit and truth." In this respect, all religions have a debt of gratitude to Freud for having provided us with a therapeutic tool capable of helping us to expose our spurious motives and thus to have the opportunity to modify them. A self-aware believer could be closer to the Father's wish to be worshiped in "spirit and truth."

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